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ABSTRACT

The status of honorary degree programs among major state universities was studied. From a list of public institutions known to have awarded honorary degrees in the recent past, several were selected for interviews relative to their policies and practices in selection and award. The list and a summary of interviews with representatives of 15 major universities are appended. In a followup survey, senior academic officers of honorary degree-granting institutions were asked their perceptions of the value of their programs. No pattern related to type or prestige of the institution was found for institutions having an honorary degree program. Among those having such a program, honorary degrees awarded by faculty for scholarly excellence were well regarded, while nonacademic honorary degrees were viewed often as being more trouble than their worth to the institution. Information is presented on the results of telephone surveys with the following institutions: Michigan State University, Louisiana State University, North Carolina State University, University of Maryland, University of Georgia, University of Florida, Purdue University, University of Missouri, University of Arizona, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and the University of Virginia. At the University of Virginia, tradition is that honorary degrees are not awarded. The University of Georgia system awards honorary degrees only to a U.S. President who has attended one of the colleges or universities of the system. The other schools do award honorary degrees, although the frequency and criteria for awards differ. (SW)

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HONORARY DEGREES

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Abstract

The awarding of honorary degrees is a custom of long standing among American colleges and universities, more so in the private than in the public sector. Public institutions, however, are showing increasing interest and activity in this area. This could be due to the increased prestige of public universities over recent decades, with increasingly distinguished faculties wishing to acknowledge the academic excellence of individuals. It could, on the other hand, reflect diminution of public funding, with honorary degrees being awarded to past or possible "friends" of the university. This study was carried out to examine the status of honorary degree programs among major state universities--the policy, the practice, and perceived value of such programs. A list of public institutions which have awarded honorary degrees over the past decade based a survey to determine current policy and practice among fifteen major universities nationwide. In a follow-up survey, senior academic officers, of honorary degree granting institutions only, were asked their perceptions of the value of their programs. The survey found no pattern by type or prestige of institution relative to having an honorary degree program. Among those with such a program, honorary degrees awarded by faculty for scholarly excellence were well regarded. Nonacademic honorary degrees were viewed often as being more trouble than their worth to the institution.

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By the broadest definition, an honorary degree is one not obtained "in course" (Epler, 1947). Saying that a degree was not granted as earned, as a "letter of credit" (Smawley, 1963), pro laboris causa (Lady, 1967), or ob studia a Professoribus approbata (University of Pennsylvania diploma), however, does not make it automatically pro honoris causa. There have been a wealth of unearned degrees, even excluding those purchased from diploma mills. One such is the degree ad eundum, granted by an institution to anyone with a degree from another institution upon proper application, usually upon payment of "customary fees". This curious practice, prevalent well into the 19th century survives today only at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, whose full professors with degrees from other institutions are awarded the Master of Arts ad eundum gradum (Wright, 1966).

Other unearned degrees include most masters degrees of the nineteenth century, awarded a few years after an earned bachelors degreee to a graduate of good character, again upon payment of the usual fees (Wright, 1966). Other degrees are awarded for what may be called life experience, for example Harvard's award of the first American unearned degree, Doctor of Sacred Theology, to its own president in 1691 (Freiherr, 1979). Yet others avoid classification, such as Yale's award of an MD in 1723 (without having a school of medicine) to an Englishman (of whom it knew nothing) on the request of Connecticut's colonial agent so that the man (Nathaniel Turner) could join the Royal Society of Physicians (Lady, 1967). Another version of that story, however, is that Yale was grateful for Turner's gift of books valued at 16 pounds, leading contemporary wags to claim that his MD meant multum donavit (Schilling, 1959). If the latter is the case, the award may seem eminently classifiable. Not so, however, Harvard's recent offer to its LLB graduates to trade their degrees, plus $25, for JD's, or a recent minor trend to award the Doctor of Arts to PhD candidates unable to write a thesis (Berkeley, 1970).

While all of the above unearned degrees have been termed "honorary," this paper deals with the more restricted award granted to one whom a college or university wishes to honor. The first such was Harvard's award of an honorary MA to Benjamin Franklin (Schilling, 1959). While no one keeps score any longer (Frieherr, 1979), anecdotes abound. The all-time favorite may be Newark University's award of a DCF (Doctorate of Canine Fidelity) to Bongo the seeing-eye dog (Haywood, 1966), but Philadelphia's Central High School's conferring an honorary PhD (Freiherr, 1979) is certainly a contender.

The Bongo's of the world may still receive honorary DCF's (or LittD's, or ScD's, or DD's, or LLD's), but the honorary PhD is an anachronism. The last on record was awarded by Gonzaga University in 1937, to Bing Crosby (Lady, 1967). Other, non-academic, honorary degrees abound, with an estimated several thousand awarded this year (Freiherr, 1979). Such activity has been uncommon in public institutions, for faculty members and administrators fear that politicial pressures could be of such magnitude that degrees would be awarded regardless of the viewpoint of those within the university. However the practice seems to be on the increase.

It was that concern that based the two related studies reported on here. From a list of public institutions known to have awarded honorary degrees in the recent past (Appendix A), several were selected for interviews relative to their policies and practices in selection and award. Those interviews are summarized in Appendix B. As a follow-up study, senior academic officers of a sample of those institutions were asked about their perceptions of the awards, the basic question being "If you had to do it over again, would you start awarding honorary degrees?" Those responses are summarized in Appendix C.

Some of the most distinguished public universities award honorary degrees. The University of California at Berkeley, the University of Illinois

at Champaign-Urbana, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are examples. Others shun such awards--the Pennsylvania State University, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Virginia. The same can be said of institutions of lesser renown. No pattern, of awarding or not awarding the gradum honoris causa, was detected by any standard of institutional quality.

A pattern was observed in the perception of honorary degree programs by academic officers. At the "prestige" institutions awarding academic degrees, reactions were mixed, in part due to the political pressures mentioned above. For example, Illinois's program, jealously controlled by the faculty and reserved for those of academic or scholarly distinction connected with the university, is most highly regarded. Efforts to expand awards to other categories (friends of the university, for example) have been rebuffed. The university's academic community is proud of its program. The University of Missouri at Columbia reported similarly, but the faculty's great concern to preserve the academic integrity of its honorary degrees has led to "headaches" for the administration and the board.

Conversely, Michigan State's president damns with faint praise the award of an honorary degree to each commencement speaker as a "nice thing to do" and is "not too enthusiastic" about its awards to outstanding alumni and to public officials. The University of Arizona and University of Maryland academic officials, however, are more enthusiastic about the "taking care of friends of the university" and about the "good public relations" seen to be inherent in awarding non-academic honorary degrees.

It is not the purpose of this paper to overtly evaluate the awarding of honorary degrees. Rather, we urge the contemplators of honorary degree initiation to read the appendices and use those data to base their own

decision processes. The information in the appendices is intended to be just that--information. If a decision has been eased, if a half-step has been bypassed, by the information presented herein, then we have served.

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APPENDIX A

A list of public institutions which have made awards of honorary degrees, as reported in Time since 1970.

College of William and Mary
University of Hawaii
University of Massachusetts
Ohio State University
Coppin State College (Maryland)
Morgan State College (Maryland)
Bowling Green State University
University of Alaska
Indiana University
University of Utah
Montana State University
Alabama State University
Eastern Michigan University
University of Michigan
University of North Carolina
City University of New York
Delaware State College
Central Michigan University
University of Maine
University of New Mexico
University of Nebraska
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Jersey City State College
University of California, Berkeley
University of Colorado
Wayne State University

Other public institutions who were found, in a telephone survey, to confer honorary degrees on a regular basis.

University of Kentucky
University of Illinois
University of Missouri
Michigan State University
University of Maryland
University of Florida
Purdue University
University of Arizona

Public institutions which never or seldom confer an honorary degree.

University of Georgia (System)
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
University of Texas
Louisiana State University (System)
North Carolina State University
Pennsylvania State University
University of Virginia

APPENDIX B

POLICIES OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES ON AWARDING HONORARY DEGREES

A telephone survey to several public universities revealed the following information concerning the awarding of honorary degrees:

Michigan State University

Michigan State University awards honorary degrees at each of three commencement exercises. While the number of honorary degrees awarded each quarter varies, at least one and usually no more than four are awarded each quarter.

The University has an Honorary Degree Committee consisting of six faculty members serving five-year terms on the Committee. The Committee is chaired, ex officio, by the dean of the graduate school. In September of each year, the graduate dean sends a call for nominations to all faculty. Faculty members fill out a nomination form and supply a biosketch of the individual nominated. This nomination must be accompanied by at least three supporting letters by qualified recommenders.

In December of each year the committee meets to consider the nominations. The nominations are divided into three categories: (1) recommend to the President (2) eliminate or (3) reconsider after additional information on the nominee.

The names of approved nominees are then sent to the President. These names are added to a list of nominees that have been previously forwarded from the Committee. Each quarter the President selects from this list the

individual(s) to be awarded an honorary degree. In most cases, the commencement speaker (who may or may not be on the list of nominees) is also awarded an honorary degree. If the speaker is to be awarded an honorary degree, he or she must also be approved by the Honorary Degree Committee upon recommendation of the President.

Faculty are asked to nominate individuals who are (1) distinguished alumni (2) well-known individuals in public or private life or (3) scientists or scholars. A Distinguished Alumni Award is also presented by the alumni each quarter. The honorary degree awards are coordinated with this award so that the same individual does not receive both awards the same quarter.

Louisiana State University

Honorary degrees are awarded only in exceptional circumstances. Nominations originate from faculty members, colleges, or schools and are forwarded through academic affairs from the deans to the chancellors, to the system President, and finally to the Board of Trustees for approval.

Before the system President receives the nominations, a system-wide committee screens each nomination. The committee is made up of members of the Faculty Policy Committee of each campus, the graduate dean from each campus, and a representative from both the system's two-year campuses. The ex officio chairman of the committee is the Vice President for Instruction and Research of the system office.

Qualifications for receiving an honorary degree include substantial contribution to the development of LSU and the state of Louisiana, and significant contribution to his or her field of endeavor or to society in general.

North Carolina State University

Honorary degrees are awarded at NC State only on very special occasions and under exceptional circumstances with only two honorary degrees being awarded in the past six or seven years. For example, the recently retired Chancellor was awarded an honorary degree.

The Faculty Senate screens nominations and, after consultation with the Chancellor, a secret election by mail is held of all voting faculty of the University. If the vote is positive (majority vote) the Chancellor receives the recommendation from the Senate. The Chancellor then forwards the nomination to the Board of Trustees for approval. The honorary degree is not necessarily awarded at commencement.

Instead of awarding honorary degrees for outstanding contributions to the University or in an individual's field of endeavor, a Watauga Medal is awarded to three individuals each year. The Watauga Medal is named after the early prestigious Watauga Club which was influential in the founding of NC State. For these medals, nominations are screened by the Watauga Medal Committee, consisting of several members of the faculty senate, the alumni, and the administration. These medals were designed to honor individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the University. If the committee approves a nomination for the medal, the name is then forwarded to the Chancellor for approval. These awards are made annually at the Founder's Day program.

University of Maryland

The University of Maryland awards honorary degrees each year at commencement. Nominations are made to the chancellors of each of the four campuses in the system. These nominations are forwarded to the Faculty

Senate Committee on Honors and Prizes. The Committee then considers the nominations. If approved by the Committee, the nomination is sent back to the appropriate chancellor. If approved by the chancellor of the campus, the nomination is sent to the President of the system. If approved by the President, the nomination is then sent to the Board of Regents.

There are certain criteria to be considered for nominating an individual for the honorary degree: (1) the individual has contributed greatly to the State of Maryland and the nation and (2) the individual is outstanding in his or her chosen field and has performed a service in this field.

University of Georgia

In general, campuses of the University of Georgia system do not award honorary degrees. Recently, however, the Board of Regents amended this policy to allow an honorary degree to be awarded by a unit of the University system to a President of the United States who has attended one of the Georgia system colleges or universities.

University of Florida

The University of Florida awards honorary degrees. Any member of the University community, faculty, alumni, or friends of the University may make a nomination for an honorary degree or distinguished alumnus award. The nominator submits information concerning the candidates and letters of recommendation from a sufficient number of sources to establish the nominee's background. The complete dossier is then sent to the secretary of the Committee on Honorary Degrees, Distinguished Alumnus Awards, and Memorials. At the present time the head of University Relations is the

secretary of this Committee. After approval by the Committee, the nomination must be approved by the University Senate and then by the University President.

The criteria for nomination for these awards include the following: The individual (1) has achieved eminence in his or her chosen field (2) exemplifies the ideals of the University, and (3) has performed outstanding contribution to the University.

Those individuals not eligible for the awards are (1) faculty, officers, or employees of the University and (2) elected or appointed officials of state government to whom the University is directly associated. If the person nominated is an alumnus, the nominator decides if the award should be the honorary degree or the distinguished alumnus award. These awards are given at commencement each year and are kept confidential until that time.

Purdue University

Purdue University awards honorary degrees each year at the commencement exercises. There are three sections of commencement, and some honorary degrees are presented during each commencement section. The honorees have their expenses paid while on campus for commencement and are further honored with a dinner and a luncheon during commencement weekend. Last year six honorary degrees were awarded and six will be awarded again this year. As many as 12 honorary degrees have been awarded in one year.

The individuals nominated must be prominent and have some affiliation with Purdue, such as a former student, alumnus, faculty member, or trustee. An individual may be recommended for nomination by an outside source, but the actual nominations begin at the college level. Deans of

the colleges send nominations to the Promotions Committee, a faculty committee of full professors, which also considers faculty for promotions in academic rank. The Committee selects the nominees by a majority vote. The names are then submitted to the President, who presents them to the Board of Trustees for approval.

University of Missouri

The University of Missouri awards honorary degrees. Each campus of the system has an Honorary Degree Committee which proposes names for nomination. In the past, there have been problems with a name getting all the way to the Board of Curators and then being rejected. In order to avoid this embarrassment and conflict, a "trial run" method has been initiated. The faculty committee solicits nominations. After being approved, the names are forwarded to the chancellor of the campus for approval. The chancellors then forward the nominations to the system President. The President then informally consults the Board of Curators concerning the nominees and returns the list of acceptable nominees to the appropriate chancellor. The list then goes back to the Committee on each campus for official nomination. The official nominations then proceed back through the same channels for formal acceptance by the Board of Curators.

An individual may not receive more than one honorary degree from the University of Missouri, and the degree may not be received in absentia. Individuals considered for an honorary degree should include (1) persons with distinctive service to the University, (2) persons with distinctive service to the State, (3) graduates or former students of distinction, or (4) persons of distinction from this country or abroad.

An honorary degree is not generally awarded to a faculty member, employee or retired faculty member. The invitation to receive the honorary degree is extended by the President of the university. Tradition is that it takes a unanimous vote of the Board of Curators to award an honorary degree.

University of Arizona

The University of Arizona awards at least one honorary degree each year. A college initiates the nomination of an individual. If approved at the college level, the nomination is forwarded to the President. After approval by the President, general faculty approval is requested. If this approval is received, the nomination goes to the Board of Regents of the three public universities in Arizona. The person awarded an honorary degree must have been outstanding in his or her chosen field. The university also has a Distinguished Alumni Award and other minor awards that are presented throughout the year; however, these awards are presented by the Alumni association.

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

The last honorary degree granted was to the speaker at the inauguration of President Andrew Holt in 1959. While awards therefore can be made, they are exceptions to the general policy of not conferring honorary degrees. In 1959, the procedure approved was for the Faculty Senate to make a recommendation to the Board of Trustees.

University of Virginia

Tradition is that honorary degrees are not awarded. This tradition is supposedly in deference to the wishes of Thomas Jefferson.

The honorary organizations Omicron Delta Kappa, Phi Beta Kappa, and the Raven Society do from time to time honor distinguished alumni with membership.

APPENDIX C

PERCEPTIONS OF HONORARY DEGREES AT PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

University of Arizona

The university awards two-to-four honorary degrees per commencement, some for achievement among alumni/alumnae and others for people of national stature. The university also honors alumni/alumnae of less than national stature with Distinguished Alumni awards. All these awards are for professional achievement rather than for academic achievement. The Executive Vice President would very much "do it again." He regards honorary degrees as a "useful endeavor" and as "taking care of friends and alumni."

University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana)

The university awards honorary degrees only to those who are of academic or scholarly distinction and who are somehow connected with the University of Illinois. In no case is the person's past or possible non-academic contribution to the university a consideration.

The award program is tightly and jealously controlled by the faculty. No administration member may propose a nominee. The Vice President for Academic Affairs feels strongly that honorary degrees of this type are worth the bother, saying that the faculty very much like the opportunity to acknowledge the excellence of an individual. He also reported that, from time to time, a proposal is made for other degree categories (friends of the university, for example), and all such proposals have met failure.

University of Maryland (College Park)

The university awards three honorary degrees per commencement (six per year): to the speaker, to a person distinguished in the state of Maryland, and to one other person of prominence. The Committee on Honors and Prizes is appointed by the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and receives nominations from a variety of sources (including sources external to the university). Approved nominations enter a pool of names from which the Chancellor and Director of Public Relations forward six to the Board of Regents for final approval (three "spares" in case the first-choice commencement speaker is unavailable).

The Assistant to the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs reports that the university would certainly keep the honorary degrees for commencement speakers, and probably for the others, given the choice. The program is viewed as good public relations for the university.

Michigan State University

The university awards three categories of honorary degrees: (1) for an outstanding alumnus, (2) for a scientist, or (3) for a public official. The commencement speaker is always awarded a degree. A "faculty" committee (including the Provost, the Dean of the Graduate school as chair, and one College Dean) invites nominations from all segments of the university. University Development nominations are solicited, but are said to be given no special weight due to the faculty orientation of the committee. Committee recommendations are added to a pool of names (submitted in the past) available for the President's selection.

The Assistant to the President reports that the President thinks an honorary degree is a "nice thing to do" for a commencement speaker, but is

"not too enthusiastic" about other awards. The Dean of the Graduate School (chair of the selection committee) thinks the program is a "pretty good thing" for the university.

University of Missouri (Columbia)

Honorary degrees are purely a faculty prerogative at the university. Nominees may be put forward informally by the Chancellor or the Development Office, but formal nomination is faculty-driven, and the Honorary Degree Committee is careful to preserve the academic integrity of the degree. Approved nominations go through the campus Chancellor and the system President to the Board of Curators, which must pass a nomination unanimously for final approval.

The Special Assistant to the Chancellor reports that the honorary degree program has "caused problems." The unanimous vote requirement at Board level, some friction between the committee faculty and the administration, and a strong faculty voice in general have led to "headaches." If the university were not currently giving the degrees, it would not start.